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Time our friends nailed that lie

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I'VE contemplated many alternative careers in my life. I never thought, though, that I would happily be prepared to become a self-appointed garbage collector. There is a desperate need to clear out the accumulating rubbish about Malaysia currently smothering the truth. I volunteer for the clean-up squad! I'd like to see all the deliberate disinformation, unsubstantiated gossip, fabrications and those dangerous half-truths consigned to the dustbin of history. If we strip away the tissue of lies, we can get at the foundation of those grievances that seem at present to be genuinely plaguing our society and our consciences.

"Nail that lie" is a quote from Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew - his invariable response to attacks against his republic. And he lost no time about it. Downright lies, of course, are easy to refute - with the facts. But the problem is not necessarily malice towards us. My premise is that it is profound ignorance that lies at the heart of people's failure to grasp the Malaysian reality.

"Is it safe to come to Malaysia?" "Is the rioting still going on?" "What is the death toll?" "Which side is the army on?" These are but a few of the many calls we get, nowadays, from our sincere but misguided friends abroad. Normally well-informed individuals appear to know next to nothing about this country. It may be culpable ignorance on the part of those who ought to know better. But we are culpable, too. Ignorance can be remedied, and it is up to us to remedy it. The national New Year resolution I'd like to propose is to get our own story out.

But how?

There is one simple expedient that never fails. Get the sceptics to come here to see for themselves; that's all it needs. For, where do they arrive? The KLIA, which, if there were an Eighth Wonder of the World, could surely be it. The rest is culture shock.

But what about the many more who don't come to Malaysia?. Somehow, we must take Malaysia to them. It is a formidable task.

"Truth on one side of the Pyrenees is falsehood on the other." Whoever said that was aware of the psychological barrier, as much as of the physical one. It leaves us hostage to the distant view of Malaysia. We have to see that our truth surmounts the Pyrenees in both senses, if we are to reach the main body of Western opinion which prevails on the other side of the aforesaid mountain, or, more pertinently, across the Pacific. We face a perception gap of mind-boggling proportions. The danger is that this can lead to some seriously misinformed judgments. George Soros recently came up again on our radar screen, brazenly demanding the ouster of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. This followed hard on the heels of Al Gore's Apec bombshell, also appearing to advocate the Prime Minister's overthrow. Perhaps the impeachment bug is catching. Malaysia-bashing certainly is!

Take that now-notorious performance at Apec. I can only believe Gore was misguided, possibly ill-advised. I refer only to one passage in his address. The rest of the speech was both constructive and meaningful. But that one passage was devastating. You can be wearing the most elegant dress, but if there is a gaping hole in your tights, that is what shows most. Gore provided a graphic case study of the enemy we have identified, the perception gap. And it is as a case study that I use it here. Not to denigrate. Nothing is to be gained from adding to the voices of censure.

You see, what bothers me most is not that Gore's remarks were offensive - they were inexplicable. Here was a man pre-eminent on the world stage, and an emissary of the US President; yet he chose to flout diplomatic protocol and, on the count of behaviour alone, violated all the universal canons of decency and politeness that govern a guest in someone else's home. Malaysia is, above all, a polite society. He so offended local sensitivities in this respect, he was judged in terms of this culture as being kurang ajar.

It was a wholly inappropriate forum, or grandstanding. Choosing to ignore the true purpose for which a good number of the world's leaders had assembled, he exceeded his role as guest speaker, to deliver a political homily directed at his hosts, and managed to taint the atmosphere of a meeting designed to promote goodwill. Having politics intrude on an economic agenda, moreover, threatened to divert attention from the overriding concern of the gathering - to try to help resolve the financial crisis, and thereby alleviate the sufferings of millions in Asia impoverished by it. A cause, let it be said, dear to the heart of the man he seemed to denigrate.

If I do not pull my punches - neither did Gore. But it is no use being indignant. Again, we need to ask why he got things so wildly wrong.

Take that unabashed clarion call to a group out to topple a legitimately elected leader and a constitutionally elected Government. It may have been disguised as a call for political reform, but it was nothing less than an open challenge to Dr Mahathir, designed to hasten his political demise. That Gore could have been in no doubt about what he was advocating is evidenced by the countries he chose to hold up as inspiration to the "brave people of Malaysia": they were all role models of political overthrow - the Philippines' "People Power", Indonesia's "Reformasi" and Vietnam's "Doi Moi". It was, by any count, an effrontery to his host and the Apec chair - and an unwarranted intrusion upon the sovereignty of this nation.

But there was worse. There could be no greater insensitivity than urging "Doi Moi" upon "the brave people of Malaysia". Did Gore really mean to invoke the rallying cry of the Vietnamese Communist Party? The truly "brave people of Malaysia", I venture to remind him, were the men who laid down their lives during the 12 years of Emergency, fighting those self-same Communists! One would also imagine American war veterans, and those whose sons, husbands or fathers were missing in action in Vietnam, would not like to hear "Doi Moi" ever again - let alone have an American leader extol it!

Gore has a strange notion of bravery. I presume he was referring to the demonstrators who have taken their cause to the streets. Any incitement to civil disorder is particularly dangerous in the context of our multi-racial, multi-religious society, and our inherent vulnerability to inflammatory words. This is the road to Indonesia. Even as I write, there are further reports of Christians being slaughtered in that benighted, tragic country - a dramatic demonstration of what can happen if mob rule based on racial or religious strife takes over. It often starts out as "brave demonstrations". Let us hope our own do not escalate, to exact a similar cost in human life!

Whichever way you look at it, this was open support for Reformasi, based on a very superficial view of what he was supporting. The main beneficiaries of the movement so far have been the opposition, especially Pas, the radical Islamic party; Pas now seems to provide the core support for the demonstrations. Hence, an intriguing paradox. Gore was busy espousing a movement associated with the party which has always steadfastly supported Iraq in its struggle against perceived US military

imperialism, at the precise moment that Clinton opted to wear the hat of the US Armed Forces Supreme Commander, and was contemplating renewed hostilities in the Gulf.

The implications were plain to any Malaysian - but not, I fear, to the speaker. Before we accuse him of double standards, we again conclude that he was much deceived.

And my case rests. We have identified the culprit - ignorance. And we have somehow to counter all the false impressions.

But Malaysians alone cannot succeed in this. We speak under a handicap. Malaysians defending Malaysia are all too easily dismissed as propagandists, apologists or sycophants. Third party testimony counts for more. Specifically, therefore, I'd like to address those "honorary" Malaysians, the resident foreign investors, my numerous American friends among them, who can testify to a long, congenial and profitable experience in this country. Many of them are already happily reinvesting here - which speaks volumes of their long-term confidence in Malaysia. We now ask for their words as well as their deeds. To testify.

The plain truth is that businessmen listen to other businessmen. Our resident foreign investors are eminently qualified to tell it like it is. For the benefit of the many outsiders who have been duped by the media version of Malaysia, we hope they will educate their compatriots as to what it is really like to live, work and invest in this country.

They will inevitably meet with resistance and incredulity. The third and concluding part of this article will attempt to deal with that challenge.

The defence is called.